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CANADIAN OPINION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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CANADIAN appreciation of Abraham Lincoln is not a plant of recent growth. There has always been less of the Lincoln "myth" in England and in Canada than in the United States,—a result probably of the detachment with which an outsider could consider the figure of the war President, even at a time when international complications might make him a possible enemy. It was often remarked of the late Sir Wilfrid Laurier that his mind seemed filled with the utterances of Lincoln, so often did the apt quotations in his speeches come from that source. Of those who listened to those quotations it could truthfully be said that no voice of the nineteenth century came with more general appeal.

It is doubtful if before 1860 there were many Canadians who had ever heard of Abraham Lincoln. George Brown, editor of the Toronto *Globe*, doubltless knew of him, but Brown had lived in New York before coming to Toronto, and though his stay there was brief, it was long enough to associate him with the anti-slavery movement, thus determining beforehand the stand which he was to take in his powerful Canadian journal when the Civil War began in 1861. The North in its time of trial had no more steadfast friend in Canada than George Brown. On the public platform and through the columns of his newspaper he championed the cause of Lincoln and freedom, used every effort to influence Canadian public opinion in favour of the North, and strenuously opposed that small section of Canadian people who, chiefly located in Toronto and aping the upper classes in England, gave comfort to the South by aiding their plots in this country.

Even in *The Globe*, however, there is no mention of Lincoln's name before February of 1860, and his nomination in the middle of that year was as great a surprise to Brown as it was to a majority of Americans. Brown naturally had expected to see Seward the choice of the Republican convention. Lincoln's election in November, however, was to him a "triumph of righteousness," and as the

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separation between North and South became ever more marked after November of 1860, Brown grew more and more assertive with regard to the issues. He had little patience with the wild speeches made in Congress at the close of 1860. "Since Abraham Lincoln became President", he wrote, "we have waded through many speeches delivered by men in and out of Congress, but we have totally failed to find any one good and sufficient reason for destroying the Union."

It was a question in 1861 whether Lincoln or any other man could save the Union. Canadians could not overlook the gravity of the Washington situation in its relation to their own future. In the United States there had always been an element in favour of the annexation of Canada and—with the possibility of the South being lost—Canada seemed to have been reserved by "manifest destiny" as a compensation. It was this feeling in Canada, a fear of the aggression possible under such circumstances, that hastened the Confederation movement and aided in forming the present Dominion. Canadians could not but be interested in the character of the man who occupied the presidential chair in this crisis and exercised such large powers for good or for ill.

Canada's fears were increased when the Trent incident late in 1861 seemed for a time to threaten trouble between the United States and Great Britain. There was little desire in Canada for war, whatever the jingoes of Washington and London might think, but the incident had unhappy effects in producing suspicion and resentment in Canada for years afterward. For a time it weakened the influence of those who—like Brown—believed that Canadians ought to be out and out supporters of the North, though after 1862 the tide turned in the other direction, and in the later years of the war sturdy Canadian recruits by the thousands entered the armies of Grant and Sherman.

Canadian opinion of Lincoln during the war period was in part the outcome of visits paid to Washington by Canadian political leaders and by others in public life. In December, 1861, the Hon. A. T. Galt, Canadian finance minister, visited Washington on official business connected with the reciprocity agreement, and on the evening of the 4th of December, 1861, he had an interview with the President. Writing to his wife the next day, he says:

> I went by appointment last night to see the President, and had a long and satisfactory private interview. He is very tall, thin, and with marked features, appears fond of anecdote, of which he has a fund. I liked him for his straight-forward, strong common sense.

On the same date Galt prepared a memorandum of his visit to Lincoln which gives much more detail. It is as follows:—

Had interview with the President last evening; Ashman[1] present. In the course of conversation I stated that Seward's circular[2] had caused us uneasiness. The President said that when discussed by the Cabinet he alone had supposed that result would follow; the rest did not. I said that, while we held the most friendly feelings to the United States, we thought from the indications given of the views of the Government and the tone of the press that it was possibly their intention to molest us, and that the existence of their enormous armed force might be a serious peril hereafter. Mr. Lincoln replied that the press neither here nor in England, as he had the best reason to know, reflected the real views of either government. No doubt they had felt hurt at the early recognition of the South as belligerents, but private explanations of Earl Russell had satisfied him on this point. He had implicit faith in the steady conduct of the American people even under the trying circumstances of the war, and though the existence of large armies had in other countries placed successful generals in positions of arbitrary power, he did not fear this result but believed the people would quietly resume their peaceful avocations and submit to the rule of the government. For himself and his Cabinet, he had never heard from one of his ministers a hostile expression toward us, and he pledged himself as a man of honor, that neither he nor his Cabinet entertained the slightest aggressive designs upon Canada, nor had any desire to disturb the rights of Great Britain on this continent. I said such expressions gave me the greatest pleasure, and with his permission I would convey them to my colleagues in the Government, to which he assented.

Mr. Ashman then remarked that there was still a possibility of grave difficulty arising out of the Mason and Slidell affair. To which the President replied to the effect that in any case that matter could be arranged, and intimated that no cause of quarrel would grow out of that.

The conversation then turned upon the slavery question and American politics.

The impression left on my mind has been that the President sincerely deprecates any quarrel with England, and has no hostile designs upon Canada. His statement that his views were those of all his Cabinet is partly corroborated by the statement made to me by Mr. Seward that he should be glad to see Canada placed in a position of defence.

I cannot, however, divest my mind of the impression that the policy of the American government is so subject to popular impulses that no assurance can be, or ought to be, relied on under

1. Ashman was an unofficial agent of Seward's.

2. Seward's circular of October 14 urging that ports and harbours on the Atlantic seaboard and on the Great Lakes be put in a state of defence.

> present circumstances. The temper of the public mind toward England is certainly of doubtful character, and the idea is universal that Canada is most desirable for the North, while its unprepared state would make it an easy prize. The vast military preparations of the North must either be met by corresponding organization in the British provinces, or conflict, if it come, can have but one result.[3]

On his return to Canada Galt communicated his opinion of the President to his colleagues in the Canadian government with reassuring effect. Other Canadians also visited Washington and met Lincoln. Mr. David Glass, the mayor of London, Ontario, published in the Canadian newspapers his impressions of the President, having been much struck by his manifest honesty, sincerity and common sense. As the war continued through 1863 and 1864, the figure of the President loomed larger and larger in the eyes of the Canadian people. Emancipation linked him with the great moral issue that was involved in the war. "It is a bold step which Mr. Lincoln has taken", said *The Globe* of August 23, 1862, "and it will be keenly criticized. But it is right as well as politic, and it will be sustained by the voice of the civilized world. Four millions of men and women will cease to be chattels and will attain the dignity of human beings. Who shall say that this is too dearly purchased, even by the horrors of civil war." By the time the election of 1864 had come around, Canadians generally could agree with *The Globe's* tribute to Lincoln's "honesty, patriotism and practical ability."

The end of the war came in April, 1865, to be followed by the greatest tragedy of the period in the assassination of Lincoln. The tribute to his greatness and worth paid by the Canadian people was spontaneous and almost universal. In the cities and towns of the Canadian provinces memorial services were held, municipal bodies passed resolutions of sympathy to be sent to Mrs. Lincoln and the American Government, in some cases business was suspended during the hour of the memorial services, and in many ways the grief of the Canadian people over the national tragedy was expressed. Business was entirely suspended in Montreal for two hours on April 19th. In Nova Scotia the Legislature adjourned on hearing of Lincoln's death, and later passed a resolution of sympathy. The military authorities ordered flags at half mast all over the British provinces. In Toronto the newspaper offices were besieged for news of the President's condition, and a civic delegation of three

3. Skelton, O. D. *Life and Times of Sir Alex. Tulloch Galt* (Toronto. 1920) pp. 314—316. See also Newton, *Life of Lord Lyons*, vol. I, p. 60.

was appointed by the City Council to attend the funeral. As in Montreal, business was ordered to be suspended for two hours on the 19th. of the month." [4]

In the long editorial which Brown wrote for *The Globe* he said: "Almost all of us feel as if we had suffered a personal loss. Mr. Lincoln is spoken of in the same terms as are used toward our familiar friends." [5]

Of an opposite tone was the comment of *The Leader*, which during the war had followed the lead of the London *Times* in championing the cause of the South, so far as this could be championed at all. *The Leader* thought that the crime must have had provocation, and cited "numberless acts of wickedness" committed in the South by agents of the Government, including "fair women violated by a ribald soldiery." *The Leader* reviewed Lincoln's difficulties and took the view that "badgered from opposite directions. . . he is not always to be judged by the strictest rule of right." [6] This was the exception among the Canadian press, which almost everywhere joined in paying tribute to the dead President.

The sympathy of the Canadian people did not pass unnoticed by the people and press of the United States. The New York *Herald*, which had constantly talked of the retribution that was to come to Canada after the war, said: "These evidences of the appreciation in which our late lamented executive was held will go far to wipe out any causes for resentment that we may have had against the people of the provinces." [7] From other American newspapers came similar appreciation of the attitude of the people of Canada. The New York *Tribune* was quoted as saying: "It is gratifying to acknowledge this expression of sympathy on the part of our neighbours in our great national affliction." [8]

The search for those responsible for the death of Lincoln extended to Canada. There were conjectures that the Confederate agents in Canada, Jacob Thompson and C. C. Clay, might have had

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4. The Toronto *Leader* of April 20, 1865, contained reports of memorial services held at Port Dover, Bradford, Woodstock, Belleville, Dunnville, St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Brockville, Sarnia, Coburg, Peterborough, Lindsay, Kingston, Port Hope, Brantford, Prescott, Colborne, London, Galt, Bowmanville, Stratford, Waterloo, Whitby, Guelph, Hamilton, all in Ontario. In the Toronto City Council one member, Councillor Denison, a Southern sympathizer, dissented from the resolution of sympathy. In Quebec the shops were closed on the 21st. A number of Canadians went to Detroit on the 25th of April for the memorial services there on that date.

5. *The Globe's* editorial refers to a noisy debauch by some Southern sympathizers at the chief hotel when the news came of Lincoln's death.

6. *The Leader*, April 17, 1865.

7. Quoted in *The Leader*, April 19, 1865.

8. Quoted in *The Leader*, April 20, 1865.

a part in the crime, and Thompson's boasting tongue certainly laid him open to that suspicion. Andrew Johnson was no sooner sworn into office than he offered a reward for their capture, and they both left Canada with all speed. A few arrests of suspicious characters were made here and there throughout Canada, but none were connected in any way with the crime.

More than half a century has passed since Lincoln's death, but—the world over—his place in the hall of fame grows more secure. He is thought of not as an American, but rather as one who belongs to all nations in equal degree. A Canadian poet, Mr. E. W. Thomson, has expressed this sentiment in one of his verses:

> We talked of Abraham Lincoln in the night:
> Oh sweet and strange to hear the hard-hand men
> Old-Abeing him, like half the world of yore
> In years when Grant's and Lee's young soldiers bore
> Rifle and steel, and proved that heroes live
> Where folk their lives to Labor mostly give.
> And strange and sweet to hear their voices call
> Him 'Father Abraham", though no man of all
> Was born within the Nation of his birth.
> It was as if they felt that all on Earth.
> Possess of right Earth's greatest Common Man,
> Her sanest, wisest, simplest, steadiest son,
> To whom the Father's children all were one,
> And Pomps and Vanities as motes that danced
> In the clear sunshine where his humor glanced.[9]

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9. E. W. Thomson, *The Many-Mansioned House and other Poems* (Toronto 1909). The extract is from the poem "We Talked of Lincoln." Mr. Thomson himself served in the northern armies in the last year of the Civil war. Two other Canadian poets who have written verses on Lincoln are Mrs. J. C. Yule in her *Poems of the Heart and Home* (Toronto, 1881) and Evan MacCall in his *Poems and Songs* (Kingston 1888)

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